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Comments on Motorcycle Travel in the Middle East and North Africa

A motorcycle trip by one person, from Greece clockwise through the countries bordering the Mediterranean Sea to Tangier, can be an interesting and relatively safe venture provided certain conditions are met. The traveler should be well armed with a general understanding of the people and natural conditions and detailed information on the availability of food, water, lodging, gasoline, and repair services along a planned route. He should have enough experience in this type of travel so that he knows himself and his machine, and is able to make substantial repairs on both. Lastly he should have an open, friendly manner and "a way" with people whose language he does not speak.

Hostility between the Arab countries and Israel still disrupts traffic between them. While entrance into Israel is possible, with subsequent travel to a non-Arab country, the ordinary tourist cannot enter an Arab state directly from Israel. Arrangements should be made to bypass Israel altogether by sea or air or to enter and leave Israel through a neutral state.

Selection of a passable road is not a problem unless areas several miles inland from the Mediterranean Sea are to be covered. Most of the trip can be accomplished on tarmac or at least on a "principal route" with a prepared dirt surface. Adherence to established routes also has the advantage of providing possible assistance from other vehicles and of avoiding the World War II land mines that are still embedded in the deserts of Egypt and Libya.

This is an area of Mediterranean climate -- hot dry summers and winters that are cool and moist with an occasional snow. Summer can be very uncomfortable at sea level in any of these countries, and Egypt and Libya are veritable cloudless infernos requiring the consumption of large quantities of salt and water. Spring and fall present ideal temperatures for travel.

It is also an area that has seen much strife, poverty, and lawlessness. There are many have-not people interested in a fast buck and with little to lose by breaking the law. While a well-documented American would probably be personally safe and experience frequent examples of the traditional Arab hospitality, he can expect to be "stolen blind" unless he has everything nailed down 24 hours a day. Certainly the motorcycle must be kept within sight during the day and must be attended or locked up at night.

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- 2 -

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Machinery is apt to need more maintenance in an area where sand is abundant, both on the ground and in the air, and where chuck holes are frequent. The will and desire to tackle any mechanical task far outshines the Arab's ability to complete it successfully, and much time can be saved by seeking American, British, or French advice on the reliability of local service points, and especially by using mechanics of these nationalities. Travel off the beaten path by Westerners is usually accomplished in convoy of two or more vehicles.

The human machinery also requires special attention. In these countries it works best if all meat and vegetables are well cooked, all water boiled, and fresh fruits washed or peeled. Tinned pastries, tinned fruits, and bottled water from Western nations are expensive but worth the price. Even with these precautions a well-planned medical kit is essential.

As a general rule, planning a trip in the Arab world requires a greater allowance for error than in the United States. One must be prepared for misinformation, nonavailability of promised services, climate excesses, and interesting places that take more time than anticipated to explore. For the two most critical items, water and gasoline, a safety factor of 30 to 40 percent at all times is suggested. In this area the unexpected may well become the rule.

Esso road maps are reported to be available for purchase overseas for all of the route except Turkey. For most of North Africa, Shell and Michelin road maps are also available. The enclosed Hallwag Motoring Map of Turkey was purchased in Washington, D. C.